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‘We need to put what we do in my dad’s language, in pounds, shillings and pence’: Commercialisation and the reshaping of public-sector planning in England

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Abstract

This article furthers understanding of how commercial imperatives are reshaping dominant conceptions of planning practice in England, and by extension the production of the built environment more widely. We make an original contribution by tracing the emergence of the logic of commercialisation in England, demonstrating how the impacts of austerity and ‘market-led viability planning’ have entrenched the ‘delivery state’, a powerful disciplinary matrix representing late-neoliberal governance. Through in-depth, ethnographic study of a local planning authority, we argue that commercialisation within the delivery state creates a distinct ‘economy of attention’, reshaping planners’ agency and professional identities, and the substance and scope of their work. The conclusion draws out wider implications of commercialisation for planning in and beyond the delivery state.

Keywords

commercialisation, marketisation, planning, professional identities

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摘要

本文推进了关于商业规则如何重塑英国规划实践的主导概念、进而更为广泛地重塑建筑环境的产生方面的理解。我们的原创贡献是追踪英国商业化逻辑的出现，展示紧缩和“市场主导的生存规划”的影响如何巩固了“交付型政府”。这是一个代表后新自由主义治理的强大学科矩阵。通过对当地规划当局的深入民族志研究，我们认为，交付型政府的商业化创造了一种独特的“注意力经济”，重塑了规划者的机构和职业身份，以及他们工作的实质和范围。我们的结论引出了商业化对交付型政府内外的规划的更广泛的影响。

关键词

商业化、市场化、规划、职业身份

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Introduction

Recent decades have demonstrated significant shifts in the roles of planning professionals and the organisation of their labour. In the UK,¹ nearly 45% are now employed in the private sector, with several local authority planning services wholly outsourced to multidisciplinary corporations (Kenny, 2019a).² Despite long-standing critique of neoliberalism³ within academic literature (Beauregard, 1989), planning scholarship has been slow to notice privatisation, or to consider the implications of the profit-motive for a practice traditionally rooted in the public sector (Dear, 1989). This leaves an important set of under-examined intersections, between drives towards more market-driven forms of urban development (Peck et al., 2013; Rogers and Gibson, 2020), organisational and managerial state restructuring (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Peck, 2001) and the reworking of public values (Bozeman, 2007) through the extension of fiscal discipline in local government (Beswick and Penny, 2017). Addressing these here, we seek to illustrate how introducing commercial logics in planning connects to wider debates on neoliberalisation within urban studies as ‘a more deeply rooted and creatively destructive process ... that is mutating the landscapes of both urban development and urban governance’ (Peck et al., 2013: 1092).

Recent contributions have begun to address this gap, raising critical questions about the impacts of privatisation on planning’s democratic accountability and (long-contested) claims to operate in the public interest (Parker et al., 2018; Raco, 2018; Rogers and Gibson, 2020). This article furthers these understandings, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork that provided in-depth insight into the changing nature of contemporary practice in England. Our distinctive focus, however, is not on the shifts that occur when formerly public planning functions are undertaken by private actors (Linovski, 2018), nor the ethics and practices of planners working in the private sector (Zanotto, 2019), but on the *commercialisation* of public planning that has developed in parallel with privatisation.

Whilst planners’ professional altruism (Healey, 1985) has long been critiqued by scholarship that sees professions as fundamentally protectionist and self-interested (Larson, 1977), there has been little direct consideration of how commercial imperatives influence planning work, especially in the public sector where they have traditionally been viewed as a potentially distorting influence on professional judgement (Linovski, 2019; March, 2007). This article therefore addresses two key, previously unexamined questions: How do public-sector planners make sense of the introduction and intensification of commercial imperatives

into their work? How are their professional practices and identities changing in response?

Studies of the micro-politics of state restructuring under neoliberal governments have illustrated deep-rooted changes in the cultures of public organisations introduced by new managerial rationalities, typically imported from the private sector to promote a culture of enterprise and challenge purportedly sclerotic bureaucracy (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Cochrane, 2004; Peck, 2001). This work suggests that managerialism can generate complex patterns of accommodation and conflict, generating dilemmas and resistances as public sector workers seek to understand change and reconcile it with pre-existing understandings of their work, potentially exercising street-level agency to shape the implementation of reforms (Clifford, 2012). This article extends existing studies of the ‘cultural work’ through which professionals make sense of political and organisational pressures for change (Inch, 2018), asking how commercial pressures affect (and are affected by) planners working in local authorities.

To do this, the article identifies three discourses critical to commercialisation: a concern for the ‘customers’ of planning; a conceptualisation of planning as a mode of ‘delivery’ within a neoliberal economy; and a narrowly economic reframing of ‘value’ in planning. Emerging from both our empirical work and recent scholarship, these discourses form an environment that we term the delivery state, which frames contemporary professional practice and planning work. We argue that pressures to commercialise emerge within the delivery state to constitute a new ‘economy of attention’, directing planners’ energy towards income-generating activities in potentially problematic ways. The article begins by setting out our understanding of the three discursive elements that constitute the delivery state, how they shape the logic of commercialisation

and its distinctive economy of attention. We then introduce our ethnographic fieldwork, conducted at a local authority currently commercialising its activities. Our conclusions reflect critically on the limitations of commercialising professional planning within the delivery state.

Understanding the logic of commercialisation

Since 2010, disciplinary pressures generated by austerity have acted as a mechanism of commercialisation within English public sector planning. Local authorities saw budgets reduced by 42% between 2009/2010 and 2018 (Kenny, 2019b), and consequently sought new revenue sources, including generating income by charging fees for planning services. Fees rose from 15% in 2012 to 20% in 2018, generating £100 m more in 2017/2018 than in 2009/2010 (Kenny, 2019b). In the short term, fee income preserved jobs and kept statutory services running, but the introduction of commercial logics has deeper roots in longer-term changes to state service provision, defined by moves to charge for public services to generate profit or reduce costs, and also to create new markets (Jones and Comfort, 2019).

In tracing the historical conditions that made commercialisation ‘thinkable’ in this context, our analytical approach borrows from Foucauldian concepts of genealogy as ‘a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc’ (Foucault, 1984: 59). We set out to examine how a distinctive logic of commercialisation has emerged within the shifting institutional forms and practices of English planning. As part of this, we identify three key discourses that contribute to the logic’s formation: the first seeks to re-imagine planning as a public ‘service’ around the concept of the ‘customer’.

The second casts planning as a mechanism of ‘delivery’, particularly of housing. The third seeks to narrow understandings of value in planning, thereby marginalising wider debates on *values* that have been at the heart of the discipline. Operating separately and together within the institutional settings of contemporary English planning, these discourses constitute a particular configuration of power-knowledge that we term ‘the delivery state’ and within which, we argue, commercialisation has become an increasingly hegemonic response to austerity, such that *not* commercialising has become increasingly *unthinkable*.

Planning as a ‘service’ to ‘customers’

As with other areas of local government, since the 1990s planning has seen attempts to reconfigure interactions between the providers and users of public services as customer relationships, leading to increased adoption of the language of customer service (Clifford, 2012; Harris and Thomas, 2011). Ideas of customer focus and service revolve around meeting customer needs and ensuring their ‘satisfaction’, rather than traditional formulations of professionals meeting ‘client’ needs (Gyford, 1991). Seen as a way to reorganise public services around ‘consumer’ rather than ‘producer’ interests, offering more choice and power to service users, a customer orientation has been central to concerns around the ways that new public management reshapes public sector work (Thomas, 2013), overlaying the public service ethos with understandings of customer care (Needham, 2006). The difficulty for public planning authorities is identifying its customers/clients. Kitchen (2007: 105) identifies 10 possible clients, from the wider public to applicants for planning permission, who pay for services and interact with planners day-to-day. Notably, planners’ interactions with applicants can straightforwardly

be understood in terms of time and money, whilst a construct as nebulous as the ‘public’ cannot.

Marked growth in charging for pre-application advice⁴ and process management services known as ‘Planning Performance Agreements’ (PPAs) has created a clear divide between ‘income-generating’ activities, typically around development management, and non-fee income activities, including plan-making. Many councils began to see fee income as cross-subsidising plan-making and, in the context of austerity, looked to further this. By 2014, the ‘average’ Local Authority made 37% of its total planning service costs through fee income (Planning Advisory Service [PAS], 2015). Thus, the operation of English planning services increasingly relies on fees and the ‘customers’ who pay them, with work increasingly defined, managed and measured to maximise such income (Raco, 2018). These changes also reflect a wider reimagining of planning as a mode of (economic) delivery rather than a public service.

Planning as ‘delivery’

Across the UK, there have been recurrent concerns about the effectiveness of the processes and outcomes of the post-war planning regime (Prior, 2005). In the early 2000s, the introduction of ‘spatial planning’ as a dominant reconceptualisation of planning in England stressed planning’s ability to stimulate development. For example, government guidance (ODPM, 2004: 3) focused on the need for a ‘Wider spatial planning approach identifying a range of delivery mechanisms, including development management and control’. Core to this were moves to change the culture of planning, signified by moves away from perceived old-fashioned understandings, premised on regulatory ‘control’ of development, towards more proactive approaches to facilitating planning

approvals, labelled ‘development management’. Arguing that delivery (or implementation) matters to planning is not a straightforwardly neoliberal position; nevertheless, the discourse of ‘delivery’ has been closely connected to criticism of planning as a significant barrier to market-led development (Adams et al., 2016). Whilst free-market economists have identified planning as a constraint on markets, governments have sought to ‘streamline’ planning to ensure that it effectively supplies development land.

There are two elements to this discourse. Firstly, it downplays the value that the process and outcomes of planning might generate. This has raised the status of ‘entrepreneurial’ attitudes towards development within planning, leading to the emergence of what Ferm and Raco (2020) call ‘market-led viability planning’, driven by a narrow concern to facilitate private sector-led development. Not for nothing did the Royal Town Planning Institute (2020) respond to a recent Prime Ministerial speech by stating that ‘Planners [are] ready to build, build, build’. Secondly, the discourse works through a managerial regime that disciplines how planning is thought about and conducted, allowing the setting of performance targets against which delivery can be measured and in relation to which various incentives can be designed to foster ‘continuous improvement’ (Adams et al., 2016). The discourse of ‘delivery’ is therefore related to the imposition of new public managerial technologies that have sought to foster a ‘high-output, low-commitment’ public sector workforce, challenging the role and influence of state-bureau professionals like planners by subjecting them to new forms of organisational control (Cochrane, 2004; Hoggett, 1996).

Under New Labour governments (1997–2010), this took the form of ‘Best Value’ performance indicators tied to local government grant funding. Despite the successor

Conservative-led government giving prominence to ‘Localism’ as an antidote to centrally-defined performance targets, a raft of new ways of quantifying and calculating the outputs of planning were introduced, such that ‘reliance on numbers runs throughout the [English planning] framework: in objective assessments of housing need (OANs), efficiency targets for local planning authorities, governance by statistics and annual reports’ (Layard, 2019: 214). The focus on ‘objective’ measures of ‘delivery’ reflects a view of planning as a narrow activity enabling markets to meet societal needs, notably for housing. In this context, the emergence, and apparent acceptance by the profession, of delivery as a keyword for contemporary practice raises significant concerns, not least in relation to questions about the value(s) of planning, what is being delivered and for whom.

The reframing of ‘value’ in planning

The tendency to focus on narrow measures of delivery, ignoring wider considerations for the quality of development and creation of public value, has been noted widely (see Vigar et al., 2014). It has also been noted that neoliberal critique of planning, from both politics and the academy, has tended to focus on the costs of planning as a block on development, without considering any economic, social and environmental *benefits* it brings (Adams et al., 2016). Attempts to reframe the value of planning in terms of economic value run the risk of further promoting a market logic of exchange and trade-off between economic, environmental and social goods, without fundamentally agreeing what constitutes ‘value’, particularly if not defined in terms of money.

To appreciate fully the discursive complexity, we must identify the parallel debate on value, or more accurately the *values* underpinning planning. This encompasses a

highly normative ‘turn’ in planning theory. This is multi-faceted, with debates on ethics and justice (Campbell, 2006; Campbell and Marshall, 1999), democracy and the nature of decision making in political contexts (Healey, 1997). Across this broad scholarship is a common interest in planning’s fundamentals: what it is for, who it serves and how it should be done. Whilst there are notable examples of these debates having a strong practice focus (e.g. McClymont, 2011), the highly normative bent of much of this theory has meant that its links to actual planning practices have not always been fully explored (Winkler and Duminy, 2016). Certainly, driven by the political power of the economic critique of planning, empirical realities have often moved faster and proven more influential than the scholarship, with wider organisational, political and economic changes widening the gap between the normative exhortations made of planning in theory and the realities of practice.

This is not to say that theoretical debates over planning’s purpose are unimportant (see Town and Country Planning Association [TCPA], 2018); rather, it is to argue that it is vital to explore how they connect with planning work in order to fully understand how planning has changed, is changing and could change. Crucial here is grounding normative exhortation of all the ways planners should be and do better (Abram, 2004) in the situated realities and organisational cultures that shape and give meaning to their working lives. There is an assumption in the theoretical literature that planners operate in highly ‘dilemmatic spaces’ (Hoggett, 2006) where they are called on to use their situated judgement to reconcile competing values. However, presenting values as a question of individual ethical imperative and judgement risks overlooking the extent to which dominant discourses and

organisational values structure prevailing definitions of planning’s purpose and the ‘acting space’ available to planners (Grange, 2013; Taşan-Kok and Van Den Hurk, 2019), delimiting the range of possible courses of action and the underlying professional identities and commitments of public sector professionals. In this sense, the ideological shifts we identify have enabled a reframing of planning practice’s conception of value, with a narrowly economic understanding foregrounded at the expense of wider, more pluralistic debates around values.

Planning in the delivery state

If each of these discourses emerged as part of the wider context in which public sector planning now operates in England, their intertwining has made the logic of commercialisation thinkable as a response to austerity. This context, which we have termed ‘the delivery state’, represents not only the new public management reorientation of public service towards customers, measurable through defined performance targets and costs, but also the wider reframing of planning as a mechanism of economic delivery. Within the ‘delivery state’, wider political questions of value and potential contradictions between different valorisations are increasingly subordinated to a technocratic focus on efficiency that forecloses debate about the purposes of planning. In this sense, it relates to wider debates on neoliberalisation (Peck et al., 2013) and the emergence of post-political urban governance (Metzger, 2017) – where England has been at the forefront of experimentation (Ferm and Raco, 2020). Our concern here is not, however, to generate a substantive, new conceptualisation of the state, but rather to portray the context in which planning operates. This allows us not only to draw out the implications for planning in England, but also to further demonstrate

the important lessons of English planning for wider debates around neoliberalism and financialisation.

We might therefore see the ‘delivery state’ as creating the conditions of possibility for the emergence of a particular ‘economy of attention’, shaped by a delivery-focused understanding of planning and a narrow conception of its value. This economy of attention, driven by the imperatives of austerity, focuses on parts of the service that can be commodified, particularly through the manipulation and regulation of time, space and relations between actors. A danger can be identified here, that either by accident or design, messier, less predictable and less easily quantifiable elements of planning processes – the public, democratic politics or the environment, and attendant ethical dilemmas – are increasingly marginalised.

In this context, the ‘cultural work’ through which planners make sense of new obligations, emphases and ways of working inaugurated by the ‘economy of attention’ generated by commercialisation is potentially significant, particularly where changes potentially challenge the values underpinning their work. In the rest of the article, we explore these issues through the experience of one local authority, pointing towards disconnects between what planners feel they are doing, what is happening on the ground and the values being realised through their work.

Methods

The research presented here forms part of a wider project, *Working in the Public Interest?* (<http://witpi.group.shef.ac.uk/>), exploring how planners in both public and private sectors understand and respond to commercial logics. At its core the project has an ethnographic focus, with five in-depth, organisational case studies – two public sector and three private

sector, chosen to span and give insight into the range of professional planning practice in England today. A key aim has been understanding how planners navigate changes in the external environment, particularly in the ‘dilemmatic spaces’ of practice (Hoggett, 2006).

Here, we draw predominantly on material gathered from observation and interviews at one local authority, contextualised by the project’s wider work. Bakerdale was initially selected to represent a more ‘traditional’ authority, maintaining a range of in-house experts rather than outsourcing significant parts of the planning function. The reason for focusing on Bakerdale here, however, is because it stands alone – both within the project and within England – as a clear example of pro-active commercialisation. Uniquely, we have witnessed this in process, affording privileged insight into the changes introduced by this new economy of attention. The dataset for Bakerdale includes over 150 pages of fieldnotes and 15 interviews, representing insight from repeated visits over seven months. This level of access enabled rich understanding of how the delivery state’s commercial logics are changing day-to-day public practice, representing a significant and original contribution to current debates. The reflections shared by individual planners in interviews were key to understanding what commercialisation means for planning practice, the planning profession and its future. Where names are given, for either people or places, they are pseudonymous. Not all participants are pseudonymised, however, with some referenced by role. This maintains narrative clarity; key participants having names enriches the narrative, inventing names that appear only once creates confusion.

Bakerdale

Bakerdale is a district authority in southern England. A town of about 100,000 people,

Bakerdale lacks the quaint sheen of some of its neighbours. Nevertheless, it is within easy commuting distance of central London, meaning developers are keen to build there. The planning department sees itself as having a long-standing, positive culture, and characterises itself as a trailblazing, modernising planning authority at the forefront of change. Against the backdrop of government proposals to allow ‘alternative providers’ to compete with local planning authorities to process applications for planning permission,⁵ Bakerdale decided to investigate the potential for commercialisation of its services through a comprehensive exercise called ‘Go-To’. Even though the ‘alternative providers’ initiative was not implemented by national government, Bakerdale remained committed to proving that their services were efficient *and* cost-effective. A significant driver, in the austerity context, is that ‘Go-To’ aspires to reduce the annual Council subsidy for planning services from £1.5 m to zero, using increased fee income to cross-subsidise policy and enforcement work, an ambition now written into spending plans.⁶ In pleasing senior managers and the council’s accountants, the planners at Bakerdale hope to be left alone to continue what they see as their good work in the interests of the district. Indeed, Matilda, the Head of Planning, is proud of her team and sees making the space for and safeguarding their work as central to her role. ‘Go-To’ is led by an ex-developer, Simon. His watchword is eliminating uncertainty for everyone, an approach he sees offering opportunities to both generate financial value and demonstrate the value added of professional planning advice.

‘Go-To’ is enabled by the discretionary model of English planning, where development plans are not prescriptive and much planning progresses through the granting or withholding of permissions for particular proposals. This characteristic flexibility lays

the foundations for the activity of the development industry but also engenders uncertainty; developers are keen to eliminate this, creating a self-contained market in advice on the acceptability of proposals. As a result, the economy of attention generated by commercialisation focuses particularly on the paid-for provision of pre-application advice to would-be developers. Bakerdale’s proactive planners also see an opportunity here, however, to engage developers early and push plans in the right directions. But this apparent win-win solution, where professional advice and commercial logics seem to combine, is not without tensions. Not least since, for the most part, locally elected politicians can have the final say on proposals. This means that a ‘yes’ from Bakerdale’s planners is not necessarily a ‘yes’. In effect, ‘Go-To’ is premised on being able to monetise a promise to reduce but not eliminate uncertainty, whilst the future of Bakerdale’s planning service becomes increasingly reliant on extracting financial value from development activity in order to add public value through professionally administered regulation. This complex and contradictory initiative therefore gives rise to a host of other issues and changes that have important implications for planning work, and which we now unpack.

The austerity context and financial logics

Austerity is a key consideration in the changes introduced, bringing financial logics to the heart of planning. A Team Leader notes: ‘The priorit[y] from the council’s perspective is to try and get a department that is self-funding’. Unique to Bakerdale is the comprehensiveness and scope of its ambitions. Commercialisation is not just a concern for senior managers; instead, a wider culture change seeks to instil a commercial

mindset. As Simon says: 'We need to put it in my Dad's language, in pounds, shillings and pence, what we do'.

Underlying these quotations are understandings of wider contexts and currents to which planners appear to have to reconcile themselves, perhaps even catch up with. The last three or four decades of change in understandings of public service delivery unite with the austerity context to create an imperative against which planners feel powerless. As such, it often seems less that commercialisation has become thinkable than that *not* commercialising has become increasingly *unthinkable*.

Despite these disciplinary pressures, planning continues to be seen as important. Simon states: 'I'm right wing, I'm a capitalist, but with a big heart so I want economic growth, I want development, I want these good things but not at any price'. Thus, planning continues to have a role: managing development processes, mitigating costs and realising net benefits in the wider 'public interest'. The difficulty is being able to fulfil this role given a national context that is hostile to planning and where resources to support it have been diminished. For 'Go-To', the concern becomes identifying the value that planning provides and converting this into monetary equivalence, for the 'bottom line' is seen as the argument that might convince senior managers to safeguard planning.

Performance and service

Another key determinant of the success of 'Go-To' is providing 'high quality' service, particularly in pre-application advice and PPAs. As noted, these are discretionary parts of the system for which local authorities are increasingly keen to charge, not just to recover direct costs but to meet wider funding challenges. On site visits with applicants, planners continue to make their points

firmly about issues like design and natural light, illustrating how they see opportunities to influence proposals early on, when they feel developers are relatively open to accommodating suggestions. Under the auspices of 'Go-To' and longer-running understandings of a development management approach, they look to be 'solutions focused', offering alternatives to unsuitable proposals rather than straightforward refusals. Key to growing these areas of Bakerdale's offer to reduce uncertainty is the promotion of the trustworthiness of planners and their advice:

We will be able to say in selling our services, 'Come and talk to one of our officers; if we tell you six units, it's six units. Don't go for seven, we'll refuse you, it'll go for appeal, the appeal will be overruled. Just take our advice'. (Simon)

One key means that 'Go-To' has for managing uncertainty is the familiar setting of time targets for responses. It is perhaps unsurprising that this is conceived in financial terms: 'Every part of time has to be accounted for in terms of who's paying for it. What purpose are you doing it for, therefore who pays?' (Team Leader).

Officers complete timesheets in five-minute intervals, something our private sector participants regarded incredulously. Fundamentally, this allows costing of the service's every element, justifying charges to clients. Notably, it also creates data for assessing efficiencies alongside disciplinary effects. Some officers reflected on the perverse difficulties that the process had generated, including a significant, arguably inefficient administrative workload: 'The problem [...] really, is finding the time to fit a whole other process into the way you work, whilst carrying on actually doing what you need to be doing' (DM Officer). We might say that time takes on a different value here in terms of chargeable hours.

This generates challenges, particularly on complex applications and around balancing speed with the quality of advice, which could be exacerbated by a mooted two-tier system whereby applicants could pay more for faster service. Despite such challenges, the logic was broadly accepted: 'It's effectively offering a fast track and a slow track, but then it's no different to ... we've had first-class and second-class stamps for 100 years, haven't we?' (Strategic Planning Manager).

Underpinning the transformation inaugurated by 'Go-To' is the introduction of a financial logic to planning work. This is seen very much as a cultural shift, whereby planners now work for 'clients':

I think generally, we should be more like a consultancy. I find it hard to argue against it really. Ultimately, someone gets planning permission, that's a private benefit. Why would you pay for that with public money? So, I think we should be billing for everything. (Team Leader)

It is striking that planners do not seem to experience this as a dilemma. Such an approach might be seen as illustrative of how the neoliberalisation of public sector planning has occurred and the extent to which it has taken root, enabled by the peculiarities of the English planning system. Instead of a public consent, planning permission is framed as a private benefit, paid for by the applicant. This shift in understanding is assisted by the fact that the profits arising from planning permissions overwhelmingly accrue to landowners and developers. Even amongst planners who were more wary, the broad logic is accepted; fears centre on whether the service offers 'value for money':

I'm slightly uncomfortable with the amount we're charging, but that's just because we're not used to working in a commercial machine. I mean the more you do it the more it makes perfect sense. I can't imagine we'll go back. (DM Manager)

Finally, there were hints that such cultural changes might influence planners' expectations around recompense for working in a new system where value is increasingly calculated and linked to individual performance, generating pressure to introduce incentives and to understand success and good practice in the terms set by a more commercial regime: '... if it's to take root, there will have to be a feedback loop which impacts people's pay, to encourage the culture' (DM Officer).

The customer and client

A key dimension of commercial logic is the relation between producer and consumer, or in terms of services, the customer/client and consultant/advisor. As noted, public sector planning has tended not to have a clearly defined 'client'. In Bakerdale, the applicant was not framed as the sole or core 'client', and considerations of wider groups, including communities benefiting from planning decisions, were also deemed important. However, commercial logic requires a defined client who pays for a service. The planners at Bakerdale were acutely aware of this shift and articulated a definition that helped separate the different groups they saw themselves serving:

... clients are anybody who pays for our service and customers are anybody who actually benefits from our service or needs our service who doesn't pay for it. There will be people who are objectors or making representations on planning applications; we serve all of those too and they won't pay for that. (DM Officer)

This may be read as one means by which planners sought to conceptually structure their orientation, with clients representing the commercial side of their work, whilst 'customers' represented the wider groups they served. This, however, does not aid understanding of what planners do when their clients want different things from their customers. One means of dealing with this

was defining their ‘professional’ roles in terms of work to raise the ‘quality’ of development and thus serve the public interest:

It is our job in servicing that client to service the public interest, not Persimmon’s [a major UK housebuilding firm] interest, and to make sure that the way they’ve presented the information is weighing and balancing the things in the public interest. (Matilda, Head of Planning)

The delivery of development

Simultaneously servicing the public interest and their clients by ensuring that developments were of a particular standard and quality led many planners to focus on design issues. Due to high development pressures in southern England, local authorities retain some scope to secure public benefits from developers provided this does not threaten the financial viability of schemes. In other words, planners can add value by insisting on higher quality development, secured as a percentage of development value and developers’ profits. However, the extent of this ambition is always framed by the reactive nature of much of their work. Planners sought to tweak schemes proposed by developers, rather than themselves taking forward radically different forms of development. This speaks to one of the central ironies of the ‘delivery’ culture, the limits of planning’s ability to actually *deliver* any development. Instead, reflecting discursive changes introduced since the early 2000s, delivery was framed by officers in terms of a positive, ‘solutions focused’ engagement with development:

I think development management is a much better word than development control because it’s not about being part of a state and ... you know, the computer says no, go away and leave me alone, what are you doing trying to

develop this piece of land? It’s more about, right, there is a common good here, how do we realise that? (Team Leader)

However, it was also recognised that there was always room for improvement, through a deepening of the cultural adjustment to this reality: ‘It’s getting better, but I think local authority planners need to understand more of what the other side [developers] are trying to do and sometimes they lose sight of that’ (Team Leader).

The local authority’s commitment to shaping better development within the terms of the delivery culture entailed seeing the local plan as a key tool. Nevertheless, this too was constrained by wider central government policies that inhibited, for example, too much concentration on enforcing design and sustainability standards:

I’m probably not in the best place about how I feel about my job. A few years ago I thought I’d got there because I wrote a policy that required all new homes to have renewables on them, you know, there was a target for carbon reduction ... That was like ... yeah, this is one of the reasons I went into planning because this is the kind of thing that I would like to see, this is what we achieved, you know? Then the government got involved and they talked about sustainable homes, that was going to be part of building regulations, and then they chickened out, didn’t happen, and we don’t have that policy anymore. (Senior Policy Planner)

As this planner grapples with the meaning of change, we can see a level of detachment from the work emerge (cf. Zanotto, 2019). This is perhaps genuine resignation or perhaps a way of coping with a shift in focus, from proactively seeking to enact positive courses of action to reactively pushing for less bad outcomes, which is still thought to be better than nothing. This shift is explicitly tied to policy pressures to ‘deliver’ new housing units:

I don't talk to younger colleagues about that, but I find it quite depressing that we don't seem to have enough control, and that's partly because there's this 'build, build, build, make maximum efficient use of land!'. Nobody wants a garden, apparently. But you do have the opportunity to ... and it will vary, I think, from where you work, the challenges vary. I think Bakerdale is a very good council to work in, has a very positive place-focused, sustainable focus through its leadership, you know, I think it's a good place to work. You can achieve more of that than maybe you can in other authorities. (Senior Policy Planner)

Questions emerge here around the extent of the professional's ability to contribute meaningfully to the development of a place. Bakerdale's specific context – development pressure plus a historically strong planning culture – make their current, albeit diminished contribution possible. This is not replicated everywhere. Not discussing the implications with younger colleagues is understandable in not wanting to unduly dispirit those early in their careers, but it suggests that the space for certain kinds of reflection has diminished in tandem with planning's influence. This hollowing out has implications for how we might view the *profession* of planning:

I sometimes wonder, in a purist's sense, whether planners are professionals or whether actually we're bureaucrats. Because even if you work in the private sector, you're still there to operate under the rules. Now, I know an architect also has to operate under the rules but building a building exists; there is no government regulation that creates the activity of building a building. But the whole activity of planning is created by government legislation. So, are we professionals? That's a good question. Then, that ends up – if you end up having a bad local plan, your professional job is to implement that plan – not to implement that plan badly, but to implement that bad plan. Most people would say it's not a professional's job to knowingly do a bad job. But

actually, if that's the plan, that is your job. And that's why it's a question as to whether we really are professionals. (Matilda, Head of Planning)

These debates are not new. The Schuster Committee on the qualifications and skills required of public planners argued in 1950 that regulation could be considered largely administrative, requiring less expertise than the more highly valued work of plan-making. This view persisted, even as development control activity became progressively more central to the operation and outcomes of planning processes (Booth, 2003). The 'Go-To' programme reflects this centrality, intensified by the economy of attention generated by commercialisation. Matilda's concerns speak directly to the consequences of the disciplinary matrix generated by regimes of managerial control, intensified by austerity-driven pressures to make 'delivery' of development pay. Whilst planning has arguably been sheltered from some of the stronger forms of new public management (e.g. outsourcing, privatisation), long-standing concerns about the deprofessionalisation of public services under managerialism (Ferlie et al., 1996) may need to be revisited as long-running processes of state restructuring continue to play out.

Discussion

This article offers deep insight into current public sector planning practice in England. In particular, it significantly advances understanding of how commercial logics now penetrate day-to-day planning work, and more importantly how they are framed and understood. Although uneven in its adoption, we have argued that commercialisation represents an important and as yet unexplored dimension of what Ferm and Raco (2020) call the 'market-led viability planning' emerging under late neoliberalism. The

commercialisation of previously publicly funded planning functions deepens state reliance on mechanisms for capturing development value, from questions of urban policy and development (e.g. funding the provision of infrastructure) to the organisation and funding of public planning services.

By positioning commercialisation as a distinctive extension of the longer run emergence of the 'delivery state', we have shown the particular contemporary configuration of these trends in England, but they also have wider resonance. The casting of planning as a barrier to economic growth and its consequent reimagination as a means of enabling development have been widely felt in numerous locations (Linovski, 2017; Taşan-Kok and Van Den Hurk, 2019; Zanotto, 2019). The delivery state emerges from the confluence of neoliberal and managerial pressures to limit the scope of public sector planning, producing technically circumscribed and depoliticised forms of planning, suspicious of practices which cannot be valued through performance management regimes (Raco and Savini, 2019). Whilst the managerial shift to *service* delivery, with its concomitant focus on the 'customer', has been used to understand local government planning, our account of the delivery state in Bakerdale takes this further. In particular, it illustrates how austerity has combined with the roll-out of market-led viability planning (Beswick and Penny, 2017; Ferm and Raco, 2020) since 2010 to intensify organisational discipline. 'Delivery' thus becomes imagined not only as a commitment to customers or clients, but also as a broader reimaging of planning as enabling the delivery of development. As such, we have shown how the forms of value inherent in planning work have been shifted. In Bakerdale, not only has this made commercialisation *possible*, but it has made *not* commercialising increasingly unthinkable as the

planning service becomes reliant on generating income by charging applicants for services. The existential threat that austerity poses to public sector planning and the livelihoods of individual planners extends the delivery state's power, creating a powerful disciplinary matrix around the logic of commercialisation.

Whilst accounts of contemporary planning have explored the neoliberal repositioning of planning, few have engaged deeply with the impacts of these shifts on planning's micro-practices. The ethnographic method affords deep insight into how planners' daily work is affected by commercial agendas. We have illustrated this by tracking how Bakerdale's 'Go-To' programme, an explicit attempt to re-value a planning service in 'pounds, shillings and pence', creates a new 'economy of attention', leading to the valuing of those aspects of planning work that can be charged for at the expense of other important tasks, which increasingly require 'cross-subsidy'. We show how this economy of attention entails a series of attendant changes in the relations, practices and professional identities that constitute public sector planning. Planners are now required to focus on fee-paying clients, through technologies such as charging schedules, accounting for client-focused work through timesheets and avoiding non-chargeable work.

Commercialisation's distinctive economy of attention further entrenches the delivery state's technocratic hollowing out of the 'content' of professional work. Commercial logics involve a shift to meeting client needs, at the expense of other 'customers' or standing up for particular sets of values. Whilst planners still need diverse skills and competencies, and continue to argue their work makes a difference, planning's historically substantive purposes have largely fallen away from discussion. Professionalism becomes defined as the knowledge required to navigate the statutory planning system, framed

by a set of comportments and practices (e.g. timeliness, trustworthiness, standard wording of advice). There is less evidence of commitment to distinctive professional values or any intellectual project focused around the purposes of planning and the substantive outcomes that planners pursue. Meanwhile, planning authorities and planners move into competition with one another, to attract and process the development on which their survival relies, perversely contradicting planning's self-understanding of offering a holistic and strategic perspective.

The new economy of attention generated by the logic of commercialisation arguably offers a privileged level of insight into the ultimate consequences of the delivery state. Professional planning values and the public interest are present only when development value allows. Reconfiguration of planners' 'acting space' (Grange, 2013) around those parts of the planning process capable of generating revenue thus exacerbates planners' already limited ability to exercise situated judgements.

In reconfiguring professional work, the delivery state recasts the value realised through planning work; potently symbolised in the description above of planning permission bestowing a private benefit rather than serving a wider public interest. Whilst ideals of 'delivery' offer convenient ways for planners to show that they are 'performing' and making a difference, their narrowed acting space allows them to do little more than tweak development according to a series of rules. Even though planning lacks the ability to deliver on its own account, measuring performance against time or quantity targets creates a significant disciplinary mechanism ensuring that planners (and local authorities) focus on the process, rather than the cumulative outcome of development. In the delivery state, then, planning's scope shrinks to a focus on the details of market-driven change, where planners endeavour to add 'public value' around the margin of schemes

(Vigar et al., 2014). The overarching concern is with how much development is delivered, not its quality or how it meets long-term needs.

We have also stressed the importance of exploring the forms of *cultural work* through which Bakerdale's planners adapt to commercialisation's distinctive economy of attention. Notwithstanding minor concerns, broad acceptance of the changes introduced by 'Go-To' was striking, with little or no evidence of 'cultural war' between professional and managerial modes of control (Cochrane, 2004), nor of micro-level resistance (Clifford, 2012). Rather than a potentially distorting influence, commercialisation was normalised as a necessary extension of widely accepted logics, its frustrations a price worth paying for continued political and senior managerial support for planning. The article, then, updates accounts of planners' agency in confronting governmental reform agendas and managerialism (Clifford, 2012; Grange, 2013), suggesting increasing professional accommodation to the realities of the delivery state.

Conclusion

Bakerdale's planners do their best to cope with commercialisation in unenviable circumstances. The context in which they operate, however, seems far removed from the normative promises of much theory, let alone the forms of planning required to respond meaningfully to the major crises society faces as climate change and inequality deepen, and access to affordable housing dwindles further. Bakerdale may represent just one case, but its specificities are also important. Elsewhere in England, where development pressure and fee income are lower, the notion of a cost-neutral planning service may generate different challenges (Kenny, 2019b suggests considerable variation across regions). Even in Bakerdale's

relatively favourable circumstances, the prospect of realising a cost-neutral service remains vulnerable to economic downturn. Private sector complaints about charges being levied by a monopoly provider may also increase, and without clear arguments around the value inherent in a distinctively *public* planning they look harder to refute.

Rather than waiting for commercialisation to buckle under its own contradictions, however, it is clear any greater ambition for the future of professional planning in England will rely on challenging the delivery state's hegemony, which produces the distinctive, narrow forms of market-orientated planning that commercialisation has emerged from. Alongside further work to understand the delivery state and the realities of working within it, we can therefore identify a pressing need for debate about the purposes of planning, proactively remaking the case for the public values it should serve and the public investment required to resource it. A key implication of our work is that the search for alternatives is unlikely to emerge from professional planners; the desire to resist the delivery state seems limited in practice. Though still committed to doing a good job, the horizons of professional practice in England seem increasingly circumscribed by the commercial logics of the delivery state.

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Notes

1. Given the effects of devolution on UK planning, our focus is on England where commercial practices have developed furthest.
2. Despite high-profile examples, wholesale outsourcing of planning services is rare: eight authorities in England are currently fully outsourced, none having the model confirmed long term. The highly charged politics of development may have discouraged some authorities, partially sheltering planning from pressures to outsource since the 1990s.
3. Whilst noting important debates on the nature of processes of neoliberalisation, we treat it here as a dominant set of ideas on the proper role of the state and the market in society (Peck, 2010).
4. Introduced in England through Section 93 of the Local Government Act 2003, but variably in different authorities according to political sensitivities and orientations towards development.
5. In 2016, a Conservative-led UK government legislated to enable the processing of planning applications by 'alternative providers' in England (Housing and Planning Act, 2016 s. 161(1)). Whilst decision making would remain with public planning authorities, the intention was to break the 'monopoly' they enjoyed in administering development proposals; introducing competition by allowing developers to choose a 'designated person' to process their application whilst freeing austerity-strapped local authorities to set fees for 'planning services' at market rates.

6. Whether this ambition can be realised is debatable. It seems unlikely to survive downturns in market conditions, making the model's replicability, resilience and sustainability highly questionable.

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